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A STUDY OF NEW TESTAMENT PRECEDENT. II.

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A previous article* described the customary treatment of New Testament example; its disregard and its misuse. It adduced the legal analogy of common law, which like New Testament precedent finds its authority only in the absence of explicit legislation; and it emphasized the value of Scriptural precedent as yielding upon a sufficiently wide induction implicit principles for our guidance where explicit principles are lacking. This article suggests certain limitations upon the precedential force of New Testament action, limitations which indicate *a priori* what an examination of Scripture (to be more fully made in a third article) fully verifies, namely, that the New Testament does not present an exact chart of conduct to be rigidly reproduced at every point and angle of action, but in a graphic way sets forth certain great principles, certain definite precepts in illustration thereof, and for the rest a body of action whereof the underlying principles, applicable under most varied conditions, are to be deduced by careful study in the light of all Scripture and all history. These limitations may be classified as temporal, local, ethnic, personal and spiritual.

1. *Temporal limitations.* These are due to the difference of eighteen centuries between the time of our action and that of the New Testament record. The downfall of classical heathenism, the dream-like period of the Dark Ages when the vegetative function of the world-organism was predominant, the Renaissance when like Samson with his locks unshorn the awakened world shook itself and burst the fettering conditions of previous ages, the rise of constitutional government, the reign of scientific discovery and mechanical invention, have wrought an utter transformation in the externalities of life. These changes, however, have occurred chiefly in the

* In the OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDENT, August, 1891.

domain of physical science and mechanical invention. We may perhaps scorn the physical science and methods of manufacture, travel and news-gathering of the 16th or the 18th century; but we dare not despise the literature or philosophy or art of even more distant ages, and in the domain of revealed religion the first century of our era stands supreme. We shall not extend to matters of religion the supremacy which our age undoubtedly possesses, for example, in the manufacture of agricultural implements and in the art of rapidly getting over the ground; neither should we extend the religious supremacy of the New Testament era to spheres of action in which the world was then in its infancy. E. g. Although Christ walked throughout Galilee and Judea no follower of his to-day abjures the steam car. The early church sent salutation by special messengers, yet religious bodies to-day feel no compunction in exchanging greetings by telegraph.

2. *Local limitations.* We are separated not alone by centuries in time but also by continents and oceans in space from the scenes of New Testament action; and the difference in locality is a conditioning element of importance. Life in Palestine is an utterly different thing from life in Massachusetts. Climate, soil, food, occupation, modes of life are strikingly dissimilar. The gatherings in the streets after sun-down; the use of the house-tops, the sale of drinking water, mark the modes of life of another hemisphere and zone. We are not to reproduce universally those elements of New Testament action which are merely local. E. g. An offer to attend to the bathing of a guest's feet (an act of common courtesy in Palestine) might be a gross impertinence in Massachusetts. To invite a guest to the roof of one's house for rest might in Massachusetts awaken serious doubts of the host's sanity.

3. *Ethnic limitations.* These consist of the distinctions between the oriental and the occidental mind, between the Aryan and the Semitic races, between a people guarded as were the Hebrews from admixture with other nations, and a people like ours in America composite of all diverse types. Contrast the practical tendency of Western thought with that

of the more imaginative oriental mind; the liveliness, not to say irreverence, of the occidental with the gravity of the oriental; Western alacrity in the adoption of new methods with the reverence for hoary custom in the East; Western brusqueness with the pervasive spirit of oriental politeness; the ceremony characterizing the smallest bargain in an Eastern bazaar with the mob-like scene in a Western stock exchange where millions change hands in a moment. We should avoid the assignment of universality to those elements of New Testament action due to racial peculiarities alone. E. g. The brethren in an occidental prayer meeting instead of greeting each other with a kiss would consider the apostolic injunction better fulfilled for them by a cordial clasp of the hand.

4. *Personal limitations.* Many elements of action narrated in the New Testament were peculiar to the personality of the actor. Most significant are those attaching to the actions of the Christ. The entire sphere of action mediated by his Messianic and divine character is at a stroke deprived of strict exemplary force. No follower of the Christ dares as did he to accept unrebuked the highest hosannas of men, or to call a halt to a procession of mourners and bid the dead arise, or with the authority of an original revelation to represent the inmost thought of God. It is "the mind of Christ" which we are especially urged to cultivate in ourselves. We may at times best "follow Christ" by departing from his precise form of action. There are elements of Peter's action also peculiar to his assertive personality. For the gentle Andrew uniformly to have imitated his brother would have been quite out of character. Certain elements of Paul's action also are peculiar to his fiery and thoroughly-equipped character. These should be eliminated or properly designated in an estimate of the precedential force of his action.

5. *Spiritual limitations.* Greatly altered spiritual conditions prevail now from many of those of New Testament history, and indeed very diverse spiritual conditions characterize the New Testament history itself. This wide sweep of action, as was pointed out in the previous article, constitutes a chief precedential value of the New Testament record while indi-

cating clearly that the incidents of action are often not of permanent exemplary force. We are helped to an understanding of the *raison d'être* of the miraculous element at the inception of Christianity in the Pentecostal period by a recognition of the appalling task in the hands of that incompetent band. The overwhelming baptism of the Spirit with its accompaniment of miracle, prophecy and strange tongues was demanded alike for their own assurance and for their authentication to the world at large. Then when in the course of the New Testament record we find the miraculous element waning to disappearance we see clearly that miracle is not a normal accompaniment of Christianity throughout all time, and that its absence at the present time is not proof of morbid conditions in modern Christianity. It is simply in accordance with the characteristic divine economy in the use of miracle, that this element is brightest at the first momentous beginning, then limited to special events and epochs, and ere long disappears from the New Testament history altogether.

At Rome where the church is seen only after its establishment there is no record of miracle; and miracles seem nowhere frequent after the founding of a church. Although the church at Ephesus had its birth and infancy amid a remarkable cycle of miracles (Acts 19), in Paul's directions to the elders of that church (Acts 20) there is no apparent calculation upon their continuance, nor does his epistle to the Ephesians indicate any such miraculous and compulsive guidance of the church as at the earliest inception of the gospel. The same remark applies to the epistles to the Romans, Galatians,* Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. If in the epistles to the Corinthians the persistence of *charismata* or gifts is recognized, they are probably of a character somewhat different from those exhibited at Pentecost,† they are represented as distinctly less desirable than the enduring grace of charity, and a chief object of their mention is a prevention of their abuse. The suggestion at least is of a waning institution. In Paul's minute directions

* Gal. 3 : 5, is not clearly an exception. See *Meyer's Commentary*.

† So Neander—Planting and Training of the Christian Church. Ch. 1.

to Timothy and Titus representing the Christianity of the second generation there is utter absence of calculation upon the miraculous.*

It is not necessary however to prove that miracle ceased forever at some point in the New Testament history. It is sufficient to note the marked variation in spiritual conditions in the course of that history, such as to render the methods of one period inapplicable at another. E. g. With the increase of the church differentiation of function became necessary as in the appointment of the seven deacons. With the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles new problems arose such as came before the council at Jerusalem. With the passing of the Pentecostal period, communistic conditions ceased and individual economic relations were resumed. So too the uniform devotion of all time to religious service was early modified by a special observance of the first day of the week, rigidly guarded however from the Judaistic spirit of legalism. As will be shown in a final article however the limits of variation are quite definitely determined by the New Testament itself. The principle of variation is established by the New Testament history, yet instead of leaving the Christian church free to an unlimited self-development, as argued by John Henry Newman in the famous essay whose logic carried the author into the church of Rome, so wide a sweep of variation in conditions is presented in the New Testament as to preclude the necessity of continued authoritative deliverances of the kind, these variations affording a composite photograph of the church, so to speak, and enabling us by induction and comparison to discriminate essential from accidental features. There is thus obtained a working model and a body of principles abiding and sufficient for the changes of all time. Many of these principles it is true are likely to be discovered only as light is cast upon God's Word by His providence in history.

Notable changes in spiritual conditions have taken place since the close of New Testament history. Many of these have been morbid and not normal processes. The charac-

*The "gift of God" which Timothy is exhorted to "stir up" (2 Tim. 1:6) is simply the gift of "fitness for carrying on the work of the gospel." [Huther.]

teristic of the most alert and modern Christianity is doubtless its approximation to essential New Testament principles and methods. Yet vastly different still are external conditions from those of New Testament times. E. g., the existence of denominational distinctions; the transfer of Christianity from a place of utmost insignificance to one of universally recognized importance in human affairs; the possession of vast wealth by Christians; and the fact that men feel compelled to defend a rejection instead of an acceptance of Christianity after its nineteen triumphant centuries.

We face a changed world from that of the apostles. We but waste our strength in an endeavor to bring back waters which have forever gone by. Yet the stream is the same, its course is substantially the same, the laws governing its flow are unvarying. Outward conditions vary enormously with the passing years, but the human heart is one the world over and the centuries through. The principles affecting human duty and destiny are eternal. The heart has ever substantially the same needs, and God has answered its greatest need in a word so plain that the simple-hearted wayfarer need not err therein. For the rest of life and duty He has given the vivid picture of the church growing up before our eyes in the New Testament record. It is not for servile imitation, but he who makes Christ's will supreme may find guidance in each perplexing present question from that record finished centuries before those questions had being, and may learn to apply amid ever changing conditions the changeless principles of the unchangeable God.